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AUTHOR Mizell, M. Hayes
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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the characteristics of an effective in-school suspension program designed to be a viable alternative to traditional out-of-school suspension for student misbehavior. The author emphasizes that an in-school suspension program must rest on a solid philosophical foundation which allows for defining and dealing with the root problems of misbehavior, not merely with the symptoms of discipline problems. Teachers and administrators must be willing to acknowledge that sometimes they contribute to student misbehavior. When instituting such a program, school personnel should give considerable attention to the process by which students are assigned to the program, how long they should stay, and to the process for follow up once they leave. Special attention should be paid to academic difficulties, since frequently such difficulties underlie student discipline problems. Program personnel (counselors, teachers, aids) should be carefully selected, and the program should be evaluated at regular intervals throughout the school year. (Author/DS)

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AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE
401 COLUMBIA BUILDING, COLUMBIA, S. C. 29201
TELEPHONE 803-252-0975

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DESIGNING A POSITIVE IN-SCHOOL SUSPENSION PROGRAM

by

M. Hayes Mizell
Associate Director
AFSC Southeastern Public Education Program

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Throughout the nation there is an increasing use of in-school suspension programs as disciplinary responses to perceived or real student misbehaviors. Too often, however, these programs are poorly conceived and executed, primarily because they are seen as expedient alternatives to out-of-school suspension which has been widely documented to be an ineffective disciplinary technique and harmful to the education of students. In such cases, in-school suspension results in little more than detention and may only partially stem the tide of out-of-school suspension. Because we believe in-school suspension programs can provide an effective framework within which a school district, students, and parents can more meaningfully address the problems often manifest in discipline symptoms, the following points are provided for the consideration of those persons contemplating establishing or charged with designing an in-school suspension program:

1. It is extremely important for an in-school suspension program to rest on a solid philosophical foundation from the very outset. If this does not happen the good intentions which motivated the creation of the program are likely to be eroded as the program is planned and becomes operational. What factors should be considered in setting the philosophical and program direction of the in-school suspension program? The program should not be narrowly conceived as a mere alternative to out-of-school suspensions. Nor should it be seen primarily as a device to remove students identified as behavior problems from regular classrooms or as a way to modify the behavior of the student to meet the teacher's/school's goals, though all of these may be necessary facets of the program. Rather, an in-school suspension program should be seen and used as a means of identifying and solving root problems which manifest themselves in student behavior which is genuinely disruptive of the educational process. Such an approach

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would mean the school system would be committing itself to dealing with problems instead of responding to symptoms or misidentifying the symptoms as the problems. This also means the school system would not always deal with the student as though he/she was the problem, as is now so often the case, but instead would work with the student in identifying what the problem really is and then work with him/her and others to solve it. Of course this means the school system would have to be prepared to deal with other major actors in the school community who may be a part of the problem, whether those persons be teachers, parents, administrators, peers, etc. Starting with the assumption that the student's behavior is the symptom, and that concerted efforts must be made to identify and deal with the problem at the root of the symptom, the school system has the best chance of not only helping the student but, in the end, helping the school and preventing future misbehavior.

2. Using the approach suggested above, there will perhaps be occasions when there is parent, teacher, administrator, or peer misbehavior which is fundamental to the root-problem as manifest in the student's misbehavior. Most disciplinary responses do not take these other misbehaviors very seriously or try to deal with them, particularly when recognizing and confronting them would threaten the status quo of the power relationships and the political dynamics that are operative in every school community. If an in-school suspension program is to provide a framework within which problems are to be solved (rather than merely ignored, misclassified, or removed from the classroom) then the school district must commit itself to establishing the program in such a way that its staff is able to make an objective analysis of what the problem really is and then have the power and support to deal with it. Of course this needs to be done within a context of recognizing that parents, teachers, administrators, and peers are just as prone to human error and bad judgment as are students referred to the in-school suspension program and like such students they need help in identifying what the problem really is and in confronting their own role in the problem.

3. When the in-school suspension program is created considerable attention must be given to the process by which students are assigned to the program, how long they should stay, and to the process for follow-up and continued support once they leave. For example, one school using such a program has found that it is helpful for all referrals of students to the program to be filtered through one particular assistant principal. In this way the assistant

principal is able to exercise his independent judgment as to whether or not the student's assignment to the in-school suspension program is really the most appropriate way to solve what seems to be the problem. Thus, in-school suspension should not be viewed as the solution to every classroom disciplinary problem, nor should it be assumed that assignment to the in-school suspension program is the best solution to every problem.

In another school the in-school suspension program is never used as the first response to a disciplinary symptom but rather follows a series of other steps, including parent conferences. If in-school suspension is viewed primarily as a way to remove students from the regular classrooms and to isolate them, and if that process is easy and convenient for the classroom teacher, then there is the temptation for the teacher or administrator to abdicate his/her responsibility for effective discipline in the classroom and school. Should the in-school suspension program be used in this way then it will undoubtedly "process" large numbers of students, real problems at the root of misbehavior will occur again and again among the same students.

As another part of the process for referral to the in-school suspension program, students should be afforded the minimal due process rights as outlined in Goss v. Lopez before the assignment takes place. This simply means that before the decision is made to send the student to the in-school suspension program he/she would be told why it has been recommended that he/she be assigned to the program and he/she would have an opportunity to present his/her side of the story. While this may not be legally required, it does seem fair and just, it imposes no unreasonable burden on the school officials, and it also provides some legal protection for the school district and its personnel.

Hopefully, the in-school suspension program will not be seen or used as a holding tank with its primary purpose being to punish the student. Therefore, it is very important to clearly define how long students may stay in the in-school suspension program at any one time. In most cases it is likely that from one to five days will be sufficient to work with the student, to try and identify the problem, and to initiate a process for effectively dealing with the

problem. No student should stay in the program for more than five days without a review of his/her progress during the first five days and a clear understanding of specifically why there is a need for the student to stay another five, and what is likely to be accomplished during that time. Such a review and understanding should be worked out among the referring teacher, the assigning administrator, the student and his/her parents, and the in-school suspension program staff in a conference. Of course, it is clear that under no circumstances should a student ever be in the program for more than ten days.

Once a student leaves the in-school suspension program it is important to have some process of follow-up to determine how the student is getting along in his/her regular classes and to determine how successful the in-school suspension program has been in helping solve the root problems of the student's misbehavior. Several in-school suspension programs use a form or card which enables each teacher the student sees throughout the course of a normal school day to indicate how the student is behaving in class. Some programs also structure follow-up counseling sessions so the student will be able to provide feedback as to how he/she is getting along. Of course the in-school suspension program should be constructed so that when its "alumni" have subsequent problems which may result in future behavior problems they will have the opportunity to take the initiative to return to the program for follow-up discussion/counseling with any member of the program's staff with whom they developed a special rapport. Such a follow-up session should be available to the student at any time during the school day on an emergency basis, should be preceded by the student's notification of an appropriate teacher/administrator that he/she is returning to the program, and should probably last no more than two hours unless the in-school suspension program staff feel it is necessary.

4. It is now a truism in many school districts that the root problem of many student misbehavior symptoms is the academic difficulties which the students are having. Thus, the in-school suspension program staff must be able to recognize and be ever vigilent for academic problems resulting from learning handicaps, inadequte previous preparation in the lower grades, use of inappropriate materials, and lack of basic skills. Solving these problems may require more time and resources than are at the disposal of the in-school suspension program staff and therefore some program to aid the student with these problems will have to be prescribed through a process of teacher consultation, administrative action, class/curriculum/school transfer, or by providing

the flexibility so that whatever resources the school has that can be brought to bear on these problems may be effectively utilized. Again, in such cases it will be tempting to address the symptom of the student's misbehavior in a way that removes or alters the symptom, but because the academic problem at the root of the symptom may be more difficult to address it may go unattended. If educators are going to continue to talk about the nexus between a student's academic problems and his classroom misbehavior symptoms it would seem logical for the in-school suspension program to be used as a vehicle for identifying such problems and stimulating the action which would bring appropriate resources to bear on them.

Along the same line schools should be receptive to learning from the experience of the in-school suspension program which may mean that for some students, or groups of students, significant curriculum and instructional adjustments will have to be made in the school's program. The strong support and encouragement of the central office will be necessary in helping the school determine if, when, and how additional adjustments should be made. If it is ultimately demonstrated that there is a need for a kind of mini-alternative school within the district's regular high schools, then hopefully such programs for students with special needs will be created and housed in the regular schools.

5. Whenever schools create a new program lip service is often given to the notion that the quality, commitment, personality, and temperament of the personnel are fundamental to the program's success. Often times, however, those responsible for initiating the program fail to put this belief into practice or begin the program with such personnel but later give these considerations less priority when it seems more convenient or compelling to arbitrarily shift personnel into or out of the program. In the case of all personnel interviewed and selected (not arbitrarily assigned) for the in-school suspension program the district must not lose sight of how vital the quality of the personnel will be to the success of the program. Individuals must be selected who want to work in the program, who want to work with children who have problems and who have demonstrated they can do so successfully, who can relate well to youngsters with a variety of class and cultural orientations, who are more interested in identifying and solving real problems than in merely responding to or modifying misbehavior symptoms, and who are patient, caring, and committed to students. It is frankly less important to be concerned with the certification of such personnel than it is to be concerned about

their abilities to communicate with troubled students, their instructional and diagnostic skills, and their energy and imagination to utilize a variety of school and community resources to help solve problems. The interview and selection process of these personnel could be greatly aided by creating a special selection panel which would include some administrators and teachers who are experienced and successful in working with the types of students described above. Once the staff has been selected every effort must be made to retain people of such quality or to replace them with people of similar quality.

6. Certainly it should be made clear that the students in the in-school suspension program must receive a quality of instruction comparable or superior to that they would be receiving in the regular classrooms of the school. Such instruction should also be at a level appropriate for the student, and any tests or other such important work that is being given in the student's regular classroom should also be given in the in-school suspension program. In other words, the student on in-school suspension should not be academically penalized for being in the program, nor should he/she be permitted to do nothing in the program. If anything the in-school suspension program should provide an academic setting which is more rigorous, demanding, appropriate, and rewarding than in the regular classroom. The in-school suspension program is not for detention or punishment; it is to help the student and to solve the problem that brough him/her there.

7. Careful consideration should also be given to thinking through the types and effect of restrictions to which the students on in-school suspension will be subject. Should the program be physically located in an area of the regular school building isolated from the rest of the classes? Should students on in-school suspension have a separate break and lunch time? Should they be prohibited from participation in extracurricular activities that may be held during or at the end of the school day? These questions need to be discussed with students, teachers, and administrators before specific guidelines for the operation of the in-school suspension program are finalized.

8. Some schools with in-school suspension programs are finding that because of the personality of the person in charge of the program, and because students in such programs usually receive more individual attention and care than in the regular classroom, some students are only too glad to return to the program. This is most likely to happen when the real problem has not been adequately addressed and the student views the in-school suspension program as a haven.

Thus, this poses the possibility that unless the real problem is identified and unless real changes are made so the needs of students are met, then for some students being referred to the in-school suspension program may be a reward and therefore may actually cause more classroom problems. Some students may act out merely to get referred to the in-school suspension program. The occurance of this phenomenon should be anticipated and careful records should be maintained to determine if the same students are returning to the program over and over and, if so, why.

9. The in-school suspension program should be carefully monitored and evaluated at regular intervals throughout the school year in order to determine if it is proving instrumental in dramatically reducing the number of out-of-school suspensions, if it is helping to solve the problems of the students referred to it, and if it is aiding the students and other persons relevant to the problem in developing greater self-discipline. Such an evaluation should involve the in-school suspension program personnel, teachers, the school principal, and a district office representative. The assessment should include data, relevant anonymous case histories, and comments of the school's staff. It should be produced in the form of a documented report and shared with all relevant personnel, the district superintendent, the school board, and representatives of the news media. It is also important to maintain and make available at least the same kind of data regarding students on in-school suspension as schools are now required to keep on students receiving out-of-school suspension (race, sex, handicap, grade level, offense, source of referral). Like the out-of-school suspension data this should also be compiled and made available to the school board at the end of each attendance period.

10. It is extremely important that the faculty at each school where there is an in-school suspension program clearly understand the philosophy behind it, why it has been created, and how it will work. The best chance for gaining the understanding and support of the faculty is to make special efforts at the very initial stages of the planning to discuss the concept with them, to get their views and suggestions, and to incorporate these ideas into the program when appropriate. How the program operates, regardless of how it is defined or how the school board or administration thinks it should operate, will depend on how it is perceived and supported by the teachers.

11. What is your primary reason/objective in trying to develop an in-school suspension program? (These can also be used as strategic arguments for getting support for initiating alternatives, but if they are the sole or primary reason then it is likely the alternative will not be sound or helpful to students.)

    1. To increase your ADA and thereby get more state funds?

    2. To satisfy the Office for Civil Rights?

    3. To satisfy a community pressure group or influential person? (NAACP, sherrif, juvenile court judge, etc.)

    4. To establish your reputation as a "progressive leader" in your profession?

    5. Because it is "the thing to do" in education this year?

    The primary reason for creating an alternative to suspensions should be to help students.

12. Steps to creating alternatives to suspension should include:

    1. Getting the facts and documentation about suspensions in your district:

       Data: By grade, race, repeaters, schools, average length, reason/offense, who suspends, time of day, week, year, etc.

       Policies: Examine policies which set forth the rules under which suspensions are to be given. Look at district policies and individual student conduct codes of each school. Are policies and rules reasonable, fair, legally valid, clear, necessary?

       Practices: Look at why and how suspensions are actually administered in individual schools, classes.

       Effect: Which students are most frequently suspended and why? Do the suspensions prevent future discipline problems? Do suspensions help students?

    2. Identify symptoms and problems that seem to be responsible for most suspensions.

3. Consider the "political" dynamics of the school community which you want to embrace the alternative. Whose support do you need?

4. Educate yourself and others to possible alternative models, and assess the feasibility for application to your situation.

13. In-School suspension should take the following into account:

Critical components:

A. Separate space
B. Isolation
C. Quality of academic assignment
D. Counseling--individual or group
E. The problem identified; process for its resolution initiated
F. Personality of individual in charge
G. Follow-up
H. Positive reinforcement
I. Due process - Goss
J. Teachers understanding and support of purpose and operation
K. Monitoring of effect
L. Parent understanding, support, and involvement

Possible problems (aside from not doing the above or doing the opposite):

A. Attempts to reshape kid to school
B. Chronic repeaters
C. Too big
D. Kids kept too long
E. Viewed as "the solution" to all classroom disciplinary problems
F. Untrained staff
G. Lack of access to or use of support services
H. Becomes effort to manage symptoms rather than to solve problems

14. Remember:

An essential part of any alternative to suspension is to first talk with the student. How does he/she feel? What does he/she identify as the problem? What does the conversation reveal about the kind of help he/she needs?

15. In-School suspension should:

    1. Significantly decrease the number of short-term, out-of-school disciplinary suspensions.

    2. Provide a framework for identifying, treating, and solving the problem(s) (not the symptoms) that result in suspensions.

    3. Significantly increase the academic, social (coping, inter-personal skills), and attendance success of students who would have otherwise been suspended.

    4. Result in effective change--not merely better management of the symptoms.

16. Most out-of-school suspensions occur because of what is called "the discipline problem." Your school's administrative, teaching, counseling, and in-school suspension staff should be aware that in reality "the discipline problem" may be:

    A. Misbehavior Symptoms - Fighting, cutting class, truancy, acting out, etc. But the problem at the root of these symptoms may be the unhappy and unsuccessful child, problems at home, personality conflicts in the classroom, community problems brought into the school, handicaps, emotional or physical abuse/neglect.

    B. Criminal Behavior - Behavior defined by law as inappropriate, such as unprovoked assault, extortion, vandalism, drugs. Many kids don't know what behavior is prohibited by law, or its consequences, and many schools don't teach them.

    C. Perceived Misbehavior -

    "Conduct unbecoming a member of this student body"

    Class/cultural differences "Disrespect"

    "It seems silly for us to worry about discipline when the most serious offense that happens in our 160-student first through eighth grade is 'disrespect for authority,' in other words, somebody asks, 'why?" - An Oregon school teacher.

    "(Observers who visited 20 schools) received the direct statements from school officials in the county that black students who were on late arriving buses were, in fact, suspended for that reason alone (tardiness)."- From a report on a desegregating school district.

D. System Induced Behavior

Bad teaching/administrating — Inadequate curriculum

Free period — Default in responsibility; no in-service to help teachers understand and deal with behavior of adolescents, or abused/neglected children

Excessive rules attempting to anticipate and prevent every conceivable kind of behavior someone might consider inappropriate at some time.

E. Behavior as a reaction to authoritarian control or abuse of power by teachers and administrators.

F. Normal non-violent kid behavior that upsets the school's management system.

17. Warning! Initiating action alternatives which provide a means to identify and treat problems at the root of suspensions may be dangerous to your professional health (other people besides students may be found to need discipline).

Root problems may be:

1. A bad/incompetent/ineffectual building principal or an assistant principal or disciplinarian whose job is defined by the maintenance of discipline problems.

2. Teachers who lack skills in relating to students or who are simply bad teachers.

3. Parents who abuse or neglect their children.

4. Your school district's inability or unwillingness to meet students' academic and/or emotional needs.